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Academic Labor Market's Tenure Track Recedes

Even professors can no longer count on job security. But to many academics, tenure may have outlived its appeal anyway

BY BETTY JOYCE NASH

In 1995, South Carolina legislators sought to abolish tenure at state-supported colleges and universities. With rising college costs and shrinking state budgets, lawmakers wanted universities to act more like businesses. The practice of academic tenure, which, at many colleges and universities, effectively guarantees lifetime employment, seemed at odds with this goal. The bill never emerged from committee, but the state did establish standards for periodic post-tenure review “as rigorous and comprehensive in scope as an initial tenure review.”

Tenure flaps have erupted periodically over the last century, especially when money tightens or when academics question society and society questions them back. The Red Scare, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War,

and now Sept. 11, 2001, have provoked academic freedom debates. Anecdotes about stifled research commonly circulate in academic circles, professors say. The job security that tenure bestows on faculty members remains imperative, supporters argue.

Yet even though academic tenure persists at nearly all American colleges and universities, fewer academics enjoy its benefits. To save money, colleges now offer fewer tenure-track and more part-time jobs. Today, 63 percent of faculty jobs are off the tenure track. Part-time faculty jobs now approach half of all faculty positions.

Many factors are driving this trend. The very concept of tenure may be out-of-date, critics maintain,

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because it keeps some relatively unproductive faculty in place for too long at the expense of new, diverse blood. Tenure may not even be the prize it once was, with today's faculty candidates worried more about location and other benefits — a good job for a trailing spouse, for instance. These and other developments raise the question: Does tenure remain the most efficient way to nurture research and disseminate ideas to students, a public good so crucial to society's collective knowledge? Or does the tenure system need an overhaul?

Useful Labor Contract or Antique?

Academia's mission is "to explore new ideas, to create and challenge old ideas, to question accepted truths ... and our society asks that of our faculty as a way of providing the best education for our students and for helping to contribute to our material and scientific progress. Now, to do all that inevitably means that some people will be offended by what faculty say and write," says Jonathan Knight. He directs the department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance for the American Association of University Professors. The group advocates for tenure.

Economists have studied the tenure issue from institutional, labor market, and human capital perspectives, among others. Ronald Ehrenberg, a Cornell University economist, has researched a variety of tenure's influences. "There are some costs, but there are also benefits," he says. Like other labor policies, it should be judged by "the extent to which we believe the benefits outweigh the costs."

Tenure is the centerpiece of the quirky academic labor market. It's hard to measure a professor's output and performance since research is long-term and teaching evaluations can be idiosyncratic and reward popularity. Williams College economist Gordon Winston explains that tenure is about inducing people "to make a narrow commitment up front in their careers.

And it works." Winston worked in corporations for 10 years before pursuing a doctorate in economics. The main difference between the two was the job guarantee. While corporations may hire for life (unlikely these days), they can more easily substitute one job for another — retraining a worker to move from one department to another, for example. That's nearly impossible in academia. "If you teach romance languages, you teach romance languages and you don't do diddly in the physics classroom," he says.

The six- to 12-year screening process is a transaction cost that helps to insure the institution's investment, with tenure a bargaining chip between would-be professors and the institution. Green professors work for less money than they would if they were "employees at will" like most American workers. (At will simply means people can quit or be fired for any reason other than discrimination.) They do this in exchange for a future shield, should they receive tenure, against inside and outside pressure. Their research may be of obscure and uncertain value, but only time and the market will tell. (The tenure journey is fraught with disincentive, says Boston University economist Jeffrey Miron, because researchers may opt for deadline-friendly projects to meet quotas for papers and books rather than potentially more meaningful, longer-term research. It can also be particularly difficult for female professors, who are expected to crank out papers for peer-reviewed journals at a time in their lives when many are considering having children.)

Tenure discussions inevitably bring up the concept of shared governance, central to the academic workplace. A university is a labor-managed firm, according to economist Richard McKenzie. Tenure offers protection against the peculiar problems that crop up in "academic democracies." In a university, faculty decide curricula, research expectations, class sizes, teaching loads, and new hires. But the burgeoning adjunct faculty common on campus today do not participate.

If alternatives to tenure were in place, would they have the same effect on institutional loyalty and ultimately on governance that tenure does?

Economist Lorne Carmichael of Queen's University in Canada suggests that tenure solves a "moral hazard" issue when it comes to hiring new faculty. Without tenure, professors may not develop institutional loyalty. In hiring decisions, a professor might have an incentive to choose an inferior faculty candidate out of fear of losing his own job. Greg Mankiw, an economist at Harvard University, suggests that shared governance might morph into a hierarchical management structure without tenure.

Economists Antony Dnes and Nuno Garoupa suggest possible alternatives to "reveal the characteristics of recruits and to maintain their own performance post-tenure." Universities could pay more to those charged with hiring, compensating the "decision-makers" for the risks of "honestly revealing the skills of entrants." Or, schools could create tenure for just that group.

Along these lines, Ehrenberg notes: "Absent tenure, faculty will focus on things which make them more marketable and make other universities want them, solely research and no teaching." That's a problem for the students. And the faculty won't have incentive to be involved in governance, he continues, which is a problem for the institution.

But according to Nobel laureate economist Gary Becker of the University of Chicago, tenure need not be formal. Employees of long service in the private sector often have de facto tenure because they possess "firm-specific" capital, he points out. And as for academic freedom, in the United States, several hundred colleges and universities compete for professors. A university interested in keeping and recruiting faculty would be loath to become known as stifling freedom. There is now a growing international market too. And the private sector increasingly needs highly skilled workers, and can often

Full-Time Faculty Nontenure Track at Selected Fifth District Universities

Institution	FT Faculty	% Nontenure Track
American University (private)	555	33.2
Catholic University (private)	344	5.2
Howard University (private)	859	39.2
Johns Hopkins University (private)	1268	49.8
University of Maryland at College Park (public)	2861	51.1
Duke University (private)	1175	35.5
N.C. A&T State University (public)	364	12.6
UNC-Chapel Hill (public)	1382	22.4
UNC-Greensboro (public)	727	27.8
Wake Forest University (private)	450	19.8
Clemson University (public)	1040	19.4
S.C. State University (public)	202	7.9
University of South Carolina (public)	1256	22.5
College of William and Mary (public)	594	16.2
Virginia Commonwealth University (public)	1041	42.6
University of Virginia main campus (public)	1164	24.8
Virginia Polytechnic Institute (public)	1979	36.9
West Virginia University (public)	814	17.6

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education IPEDS, Fall 2005 Employees by Assigned Position Data File published as appendix to Contingent Faculty Index 2006, American Association of University Professors

offer competitive or superior salaries and research environments for newly minted doctorates.

Cathy Trower of Harvard's Graduate School of Education researches faculty work life. "When we talk to survey doctoral candidates, it's not automatic that they're going into the academy," she says. "If you think of a place like Google, they're competing to be a great place to work."

Suppression of ideas is serious business. Although some say that contracts can guarantee academic freedom, one can only imagine the hassle of proving behind-the-scenes muzzling of research. Todd Cherry, an economist at Appalachian State University, notes that research can be controlled subtly, say, through a call to a dean by an industry executive or elected official. He cites an instance of a high-ranking state official who persuaded a president to remove professors whose research agendas he didn't like: The tenured ones

stayed; the nontenured ones departed. Cherry describes tenure as a "mechanism to prevent anticompetitive behavior in the marketplace of ideas."

Without tenure, Cherry says, some entities would be more likely to "skew the [research] outcomes to their benefit, not society's."

Human Capital, Imperfect Markets

The decline in tenure-track positions at American universities seems to be associated with trends in graduation rates. Ehrenberg and colleague Liang Zhang demonstrated that if the proportion of tenured faculty declines, the six-year graduation rate also declines. They found a 10 percentage point increase in the percent of part-time faculty at public institutions is associated with a 2.65 percentage point reduction in its graduation rate. Similarly a 10 percentage point increase in the percent of full-time faculty not on tenure-track lines at a public college or university is

associated with a 2.22 percentage point reduction in the institution's graduation rate.

Tenure also corrects an imperfect market for narrow specialties, according to a paper by Kalyan Chatterjee and Robert Marshall, economists at Pennsylvania State University. Academics opt for narrow at the expense of broad skills, making them less valuable in the marketplace should they be unsuccessful at the tenure "tournament." Academics whose investments don't pay off in tenure are out of luck unless the specialty is in demand. Of tenure they say: "Employers prefer it because it encourages increased levels of investment. Employees prefer it since it prevents employers from taking advantage of the erosion of the outside opportunities of employees as they strive for results in their discipline."

The tenure review itself extends over several months as reports and recommendations travel from committee to committee through university levels. Meanwhile, the pressure builds. Richard Fine, an English professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, got tenure in 1985. He sweated it because the market was tight, his first child had just been born, and he wondered whether he could secure another job. He had published a book, and articles in refereed and non-refereed journals. "In the mid-'80s, quite a few people in English who did not get tenure did indeed leave the profession, for the foreign service, or work in publishing, or research-related jobs." He echoes many of the tenured who say that tenure is not about a "job for life," it's about freedom to pursue research and protection from not only outside but also from within the institution. Professors need to speak freely in class, sometimes about controversial subjects. He notes that faculty may be fired for inadequate performance after post-tenure review, and that tenure offers no protection against wrongdoing.

Chatterjee observes that, while he has been tenured for 22 years, he felt he could always return to India if he

didn't receive tenure. "It [tenure] certainly safeguards an academic against not just things like this Ross case," he says, referring to the first reported ouster of an academic in 1900 due to outside influence. Edmund Ross of Stanford University was forced to resign after Leland Stanford's widow objected to his research.

Chatterjee notes that tenure protects professors from "fads." Academic administrators may decide that a particular sub-field, such as information systems, is the "wave of the future." There are attempts to direct where one's work should go, and tenure frees professors to pursue the research they find interesting.

Tenure's Changing Face

While Chatterjee and others don't believe that tenure will disappear, it is nonetheless being tweaked. Probation, for instance, now may extend out to 10 or 11 years. Some universities are allowing time-outs for family purposes. Some institutions have established renewable contracts in addition to tenure tracks. Trower reports that a popular option at Webster University in St. Louis is the nontenure track, with perks like a sabbatical every five years. "Something like 80 to 85 percent take the nontenure track," she says. "It's wildly popular."

Still, it remains rare for a university to get rid of tenure. At the University of Minnesota in 1996, because of

financial pressures, the administration proposed changes that would have effectively muted the tenure system. A backlash among faculty included a call for a union vote; the regents backed off. Among the handful of schools that have banished tenure altogether are Bennington College and Evergreen State University.

Differences in labor law make comparisons to Western Europe and the United Kingdom difficult. In Europe, many universities are state-run, and those jobs, as with many in those countries, come with protections already, notes economist Dnes at the University of Hull in the United Kingdom. There, tenure was "softened" in 1988, but not completely abolished. "In the U.K., there is still a move from 'probation' to 'permanency' after three or four years into the game, but it is not that tough," he says.

Dnes adds that the real quality sifting occurs when academics apply for full professor. In the U.K., tenure is dominated by standard labor law, which is characterized by employment protection legislation that makes it difficult to fire people anyway, he notes. "This is a very significant difference from the U.S. legal background, which remains dismissal at will under the common law."

Ehrenberg and co-authors Paul Pieper and Rachel Willis tested the labor market tenet that professors should be willing to accept jobs for which tenure is less likely in exchange

for more money, and found some evidence that it's generally true. But Trower, who works in a nontenured position, says that money isn't always the best substitute for tenure — there's professional growth, for instance. "Young academics are looking for support from the department and development opportunities," she says. "They expect to be evaluated and want to be evaluated."

Cost-conscious colleges may choose to outsource language classes in low demand. English departments cope with enrollment fluctuations by adding and taking away adjuncts as needed. Trower notes: "The market is at work here and we can't continue to ignore it."

Patricia Lesko, who earned a master of fine arts degree, publishes the *Adjunct Advocate*, a magazine with 100,000 subscribers. She started it in 1992, when she couldn't get anything but part-time teaching jobs. Supply is way out of whack with demand in some fields. "Colleges throw graduates all over the place," she says.

But while tenure remains a powerful hook with which to reel in good minds, surveys indicate work-life balance and location lure academics too. Tenure may survive, but with flexibility. Versatility to young academics today may be what tenure was to earlier generations. That may include the tenure track, but increasingly, it may not. **RF**

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